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THE OPERATIONS OF G COMPANY, 116TH INFANTRY (29TH
INFANTRY DIVISION) IN A DAYLIGHT AND NIGHT ATTACK ON
ST-CLAIR-SUR-ELLE, NORMANDY, FRANCE, 12-13 JUNE 1944
(NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described INFANTRY COMPANY ATTACKING A
RIVER LINE AND ~~STRONGLY~~ DEFENDED TOWN IN HEDGEROW COUNTRY

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company G, 116th Infantry, 29th U.S. Division in the capture of ST-CLAIR-SUR-ELLE, NORMANDY, FRANCE, during the drive to ST. LO.

In order to orient the reader, it will be necessary to discuss briefly the major events which led up to this action.

On 6 June 1944, the long awaited second front on the EUROPEAN CONTINENT was created by the landings on the NORMANDY COAST of FRANCE of the American First and British Second Armies. (See Map A)

The American V Corps, using the 1st and 29th U.S. Infantry Divisions in the assault, landed on OMAHA BEACH. (1)

The 29th Division continued its successful drive inland until on 11 June, it had reached a position generally along the north banks of the ELLE RIVER. (2) (See Map B)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

In the attack plan for 12 June, the division's main effort was to be made by the 115th Infantry, with the 175th Infantry in defensive positions on the west flank of V Corps and the 116th Infantry in reserve. The 115th was ordered to attack across the ELLE RIVER at 0500, its objectives ST-CLAIR-SUR-ELLE and COUVAINS, in an operation which would protect

(1) A-1, Map No. I

(2) A-1, p. 154 & Map No. XV

the right flank of the 2d Division as it advanced on HILL 192. (3)

At the end of a day of hard fighting, the 115th had either been held or forced to withdraw to its starting position along the north banks of the ELLE RIVER. (4)

The 116th Infantry was alerted at 1630 to take over the attack of the 115th. (5)

The 2d Battalion, 116th had closed into a bivouac area, near L'EPINAY-TESSON, at 1630, at the completion of a 12 mile march and had just completed setting up its perimeter defense.

G Company had visions of a good nights rest when at 1800, a jeep from battalion headquarters drove up with the message for the company commander to report to battalion for an attack order. The message also contained instructions for G Company to prepare for action and to move to the road in vicinity of battalion headquarters to meet the company commander when he had received the battalion order. (6)

G Company was in good condition physically but in need of an opportunity to clean up, since it had been in continuous contact with the Germans since early morning of 6 June. The morale was high despite having had a fifty percent loss in personnel. The supply of small arms ammunition and mortar shells was adequate, but artillery fire had not been available due to the loss at sea of the artillery battalion which normally supported the 116th Infantry. The Company's communication consisted of one SCR 300 in the battalion net. (7)

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- (3) A-1, p. 154
 - (4) A-1, p. 155
 - (5) A-1, p. 155
 - (6) Personal knowledge
 - (7) Personal knowledge

THE BATTALION PLAN

When all the company commanders had been assembled, the battalion commander gave his order. The battalion had been given the mission of capturing ST-CLAIR-SUR-ELLE that evening. The order of march would be G, E, H, F, Headquarters. The direction south on the road on which we now were. When asked for more information, the battalion commander explained there was no further information at the present time but that the regimental commander would meet the battalion about a mile down the road and give further instructions. (8)

The G Company Commander left the battalion C.P. and met his company ready to move on to the road.

The company executive officer had already assembled the platoon leaders. They were given all the information then available. There being no transportation immediately available, the company commander and platoon leaders went ahead on foot to find the regimental commander. The executive officer was to bring up the company.

The regimental commander was met at the cross roads about 300 yards north of the ELLE RIVER. His orders were brief. He ordered G Company to attack on the left of the road, cross the ELLE RIVER and continue on and take ST-CLAIR. When asked if there was any enemy information, the regimental commander stated that there was an anti-tank gun just across the river and it had knocked out three of our tanks.

The head of G Company was now about 300 yards away. The regimental commander wanted to know how long before the company could attack. The company commander wanted 45 minutes

(8) Personal knowledge

but the regimental commander stated that he could get down to the river on his knees in 45 minutes and that he would give the company 15 minutes to get going. The time was now 1915.

The company commander told the regimental commander that G Company had no supporting weapons except its own 60 mm mortars. A Captain, forward observer, from the 58th Field Artillery Battalion was immediately attached to G Company. The regimental commander was very insistent that the attack start immediately to take advantage of the remaining daylight. (9)

THE COMPANY PLAN OF ATTACK

The platoon leaders, having been present during the entire conversation between the regimental and company commanders, were aware of the general situation and the lack of time to prepare properly for such an attack.

The attack plan of G Company was in a column of platoons in the order of 3d, 2d, 1st with the light machine gun section in support of the 3d Platoon. The mortar section was to set up and be prepared to fire on the river crossing as soon as possible. The artillery was to open fire as soon as observation on the river could be gotten. However, the Artillery forward observer could not contact his battalion by radio and no fire could be expected until wire was laid or another radio gotten. The weapons of H Company were not available and the time did not permit them to be brought up for the initial part of the attack. The line of departure was the road running east and west about 300 yards north of the ELLE RIVER. (10)

(9) Personal knowledge

(10) Personal knowledge

NARRATION

THE ATTACK ON THE ELLE RIVER

The 3d Platoon, led by Lieutenant John R. Hall, crossed the line of departure at 1935. (See Map C) The platoon's right flank guided on the road designated as the axis of advance. Due to several hedgerows running perpendicular to the direction of attack and an orchard, the platoon was able to advance to the last hedgerow before the river without receiving a shot from the Germans. It was hoped the crossing of the river would be easy. The lead squad of the 3d Platoon had left the cover of the last hedgerow and was crossing the river when the Germans opened fire. Two rounds of fire from an anti-tank gun and heavy small arms fire quickly killed or wounded all eight men of the squad. Lieutenant Hall, realizing, that it would be useless to try to force a crossing of the river in the face of such strong resistance and without supporting fire, had the remainder of his platoon stay back of the hedgerow and fire across the river. The anti-tank gun had been located. The 60 mm mortars were placed on the anti-tank gun, and as was later determined, destroyed the gun by setting it on fire. (11)

From the position now held by the remainder of the 3d Platoon, the company commander and his platoon leaders had their first look at the ELLE RIVER and the terrain on both sides. The river was only about 30 feet wide and appeared to be easily fordable once reached, but it lay in the middle of a draw about 125 yards wide. The slope of the ground on both sides was sharp and without any cover. The ground on the

(11) Personal knowledge; Statement of Lt. John R. Hall

opposite side of the river rose abruptly to a height of about 30 feet and was heavily wooded and covered with brush and vines. The prospects of crossing the river without artillery and mortar support did not look easy. The battalion C.P. was contacted and given the situation. Mortar and artillery support was requested. Battalion replied that it could not get any artillery but had already sent an 81 mm mortar observer and a platoon of machine guns from H Company to support G Company, and that E Company was attacking on the right of the road. Also that the battalion commander was on his way to G Company. At this time the regimental commander appeared and wanted to know what was holding up the company. The company commander explained the situation but the regimental commander was very displeased and ordered the attack to get going immediately. (12)

The 81 mm mortar observer and platoon of machine guns from H Company had arrived and were placed in position to fire.

Heavy small arms fire could now be heard on G Company's right and it was assumed this was coming from E Company's attack across the road.

The attack was continued at 2000 with two platoons, the 2d and 3d, with the 2d on the left. All machine guns and mortars were to fire for two minutes before the two rifle platoons assaulted across the river. Artillery fire was not yet available.

The supporting machine guns and mortars opened fire and two minutes later the two rifle platoons made the attack. This attack was also beaten back by heavy small arms fire by the Germans along the entire front.

It was now 2015 and the sun had set. Battalion was again

(12) Personal knowledge

informed of the situation.

Sergeant John Haggerty from the 1st Platoon was ordered to take his squad of seven men on a reconnaissance to the Company's left flank and locate the flank of the enemy. It was planned if the enemy's flank could be determined, to use the 1st Platoon in a wide flanking movement on the position now faced by the 2d and 3d Platoons. The patrol was never seen again. (13)

At 2020, the artillery forward observer succeeded in firing his first round. The artillery was quickly registered. The 1st Platoon was then committed on the left of the 2d Platoon. All platoons were to attack after a four minute preparation of all supporting weapons.

During the preparation, a force of about 20 Germans was observed running south on the ST-CLAIR ROAD. They were quickly engaged by machine gun and rifle fire. The 3d Platoon, realizing that the enemy was withdrawing, began to assault immediately after the artillery lifted. The 2d and 1st Platoons, seeing the 3d advancing across the river, quickly followed. (14)

ADVANCE TO ST-CLAIR

G Company was now across the river and about 800 yards beyond. The ST-CLAIR ROAD, at this point, takes a sharp right turn and due to approaching darkness, G Company Commander called a halt to get organized. A report of progress was made to the battalion C.P. by radio. Battalion ordered the attack to continue to ST-CLAIR.

The 1st Battalion began passing through the left flank

(13) Personal knowledge

(14) Personal knowledge

of G Company on its way to COUVAINS. In doing so, the 1st Platoon of G Company became confused and went along with the 1st Battalion for some 500 yards before it realized its mistake. This caused a delay in G Company's reorganization. (15)

The reorganization was completed at 2200. It was now dark. Noise made by the 1st Battalion on the left and the remainder of the 2d Battalion on the right could be plainly heard but was some distance away. ST-CLAIR was now about 2000 yards away.

G Company continued the attack with the 1st Platoon on the road and the remainder of the company about 75 yards to the left of the road and in a column of platoons. Visibility was now limited to about 25 yards and the men were kept closed up to keep contact.

The company moved rapidly and without receiving a shot for the next 1000 yards. The movement was not as quiet as it could have been and may have caused the Germans to think it was a larger force than a company. Eight prisoners were taken and sent to the rear.

A German machine gun suddenly opened fire on the platoon using the road. The fire was all high and caused no casualties. The gun fired about 100 rounds and then became quiet. Before any action could be started against the gun, the Germans came out on the road and gave up. There were four of them. The prisoners were willing to talk. Sergeant T. T. Fettinger, platoon sergeant of the 1st Platoon, could speak German and got the information that ST-CLAIR was occupied by a company of bicycle troops. Also, that there were trenches and gun emplacements already dug around the outside edge of the town.

(15) Personal knowledge; Statement by Sgt. Morton

The time was now 2300.

The men were getting sleepy and at each halt a great many would go to sleep and it was difficult to get going again. Radio communication with battalion headquarters was out. However, the battalion executive officer and S-1 along with F Company had moved up and joined on the end of G Company. The battalion executive officer was brought up to date on the situation and G Company's plan to continue on until ST-CLAIR was reached. The exact location of the remainder of the battalion and the battalion commander was not known. The executive officer gave his approval of G Company's plan and the company again moved out with the first platoon on the road and the remainder of the company about 75 yards off to the left, with connecting files in between. (16)

The company advanced the remaining distance to the edge of ST-CLAIR without any opposition. When the first buildings were reached, the company was halted and a reconnaissance was made. The 1st Platoon was used for this reconnaissance. The trenches which the prisoners had told of were quickly located. They extended to the left of the road and ran for about 200 yards and were unoccupied. The 1st Platoon crossed these trenches and was preparing to cross a hedgerow which surrounded what looked like a barn and a small orchard, when they were challenged in German. Since the platoon was against the hedgerow and in a good position, every man froze and remained silent but ready and waited for the Germans to make the next move.

The next move by the Germans came shortly. It was an offer to surrender if two Americans would come into the barn to talk to their officer. This didn't sound too good. The

(16) Personal knowledge

Company Commander, Sergeant Morton, and Sergeant Fettinger had a quick conference and decided to tell the Germans they would have to come to the Americans. However, Sergeants Morton and Fettinger were willing to go into the barn. Even before the Germans were given the answer, it became apparent what they were up to. They tried to rush the hedgerow, firing their weapons and shouting loudly. But the platoon was ready with rifles and hand grenades. The Germans were beaten off and gave up the attack. Some could be heard moaning as if badly wounded. The 1st Platoon suffered one casualty. (17)

The 1st Platoon then withdrew to the remainder of the company. By this time practically every man, except the 1st Platoon was asleep and very difficult to wake up. The time was now about 0030 and the company had been on the move for 18 hours.

Realizing that it was hopeless to try to continue into ST-CLAIR, the company commander contacted the battalion executive officer. It was decided to occupy the German trenches and some adjoining hedgerows, contact the battalion commander, let the men get a little rest, and continue at daybreak.

A patrol was sent to contact the battalion commander and give him our location and situation. F and G Companies were organized in an all round defensive position. The artillery liaison officer had very weak radio contact with his artillery but enough to put harassing fire to include some WP rounds into ST-CLAIR. The WP started two fires which gave some visibility in the direction of the town. Most of the men managed to get a little sleep during the remaining hours of darkness but due to the company's isolated and uncertain position, there was no

(17) Personal knowledge

relaxation on the part of the officers and NCO's.

The patrol to the battalion commander returned with information as to his and E Company's location and that the attack would continue at daybreak. (18)

During the night considerable activity to include movement of what was thought to be tracked vehicles could be heard in ST-CLAIR. At one time movement of what was thought to be a tank was heard on the left flank. With all of this activity, it sounded very much like the Germans were getting ready to attack at daylight.

At the first sign of daybreak, all men were awakened, alerted, and gotten ready for the expected attack.

It came shortly after daybreak and aided by a fog which had settled during the night, the attacking Germans were able to get within about 75 yards of G Company's positions before being seen. Luckily, the attack came in a sector covered by a section of machine guns from H Company. The attack consisted of about 40 Germans with their small arms. The attack was beaten off, principally, by machine gun fire but aided by some rifle fire. The platoon leader of the machine gun platoon was killed and nine Germans were later counted dead. (19)

About 30 minutes later when it was apparent that the Germans were not going to attack again, G and F Companies moved out, G Company on the right.

As soon as ST-CLAIR was entered, the Germans could be seen, mounted on bicycles, trying to get out. There was considerable small arms firing done by G Company at these bicycle mounted Germans and many were killed.

(18) Personal knowledge

(19) Personal knowledge

The company needed no urging to move through the town to the far side. When the far side of the town had been reached, G Company was reorganized and waited for the remainder of the battalion. The battalion commander and E Company arrived shortly and ST-CLAIR was organized for defense. (20)

To sum up the results of this action: G Company advanced a total of 3000 yards and captured an objective which an entire battalion had failed to take the day before. The company suffered a total of 27 casualties, nearly one-third of its total strength. It had killed 19 Germans by actual count and taken 17 prisoners. The action had been fought predominately with small arms. G Company had received limited artillery and mortar support because of poor communication. No artillery and mortar fire was received from the Germans.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. PREPARATION

The operation was successful despite the lack of good planning and preparation. G Company was given only 15 minutes to make an attack. This did not permit the employment of the battalion weapons in the initial phase of the attack. It is believed that had enough time been given to allow the artillery and mortars to be used, the attack would have been successful on the first attempt and with fewer casualties.

2. SUPPLY AND EVACUATION

Supply did not present a problem in this operation. However, there was no plan in the battalion order for evacuation (20) Personal knowledge

of wounded and prisoners. To evacuate the wounded and prisoners during the hours of 2200 and 0600 of 12-13 June, it was necessary to furnish large escorts for the 2½ miles back to the battalion aid station. In a situation of this kind, aid stations and higher headquarters must be prepared to move up in order to shorten lines of evacuation and communication.

3. THE OBJECTIVE

In my opinion, the objective was not too large for a battalion. However, the committing of the battalion piecemeal rather than a coordinated attack of two companies abreast delayed the accomplishment of the mission.

4. ENEMY DEFENSES

G Company did not receive a single round of artillery or mortar fire during the operation. This, undoubtedly, aided in the quick accomplishment of the mission. The high ground just south of the ELLE RIVER had been well prepared by the Germans for defense. Well dug in positions for riflemen and automatic weapons enabled the Germans to place flanking fire on the attackers. These positions, aided by the natural camouflage, were almost impossible to locate. Strong defensive positions had been prepared at ST-CLAIR, but these were denied the Germans by the rapid advance of G Company.

5. ACTIONS OF THE REGIMENTAL COMMANDER

A Regimental Commander should not issue orders direct to a company commander as was done in this case. The battalion commander of the 2d Battalion was a very competent officer,

but was not allowed to run his battalion in this case and a great deal of confusion resulted.

6. DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

A battalion of the 115th Infantry Regiment, earlier on the same day, had failed to cross the ELLE RIVER in the sector assigned to G Company. It was definitely known by higher headquarters that the river line was strongly defended by the Germans but this information was withheld and the inference was that the crossing would be easy and only take a few minutes. Paragraph one of an attack order calls for all enemy information. Had G Company been given this information, the attack plan would have had two platoons in the attack initially instead of one.

LESSONS

1. A frontal attack against well dug in small arms is costly without mortar and artillery preparations.
- ✓ 2. Planning and coordination should not be sacrificed for speed.
3. A poor plan well executed can be successful.
- 7 4. When the enemy wishes to discuss surrender terms, make him come to you.
- 7 5. Eighteen hours is too long for troops to be continuously moving by foot without rest and sleep.